

Them and Us

There has always been an interaction between aid providers and armed forces. Ever since the Red Cross was established under the leadership of Henry Dunant, assistance providers have always attempted to deliver help to those injured on the battlefield, regardless of their allegiances. With every belligerent interested in seeing its own injured soldiers properly treated by first-aid workers, regardless of where they may be, international conventions and treaties have laid down a number of rules governing the field of action and the duties of organizations supplying aid.

As a result, international humanitarian law (Geneva Conventions and additional protocols) has established the right of relief agencies to provide assistance to the classes of persons protected under this very law (civilians, injured or ill...) to the extent that they respect the principles of humanity, namely that they treat individuals humanely in all circumstances and of impartiality when dispensing aid without any form of discrimination.¹

To complete and to allow for these principles to be put into practice, major humanitarian organizations² such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) base their actions and presence on two fundamental principles: independence in their decisions as on their means of action, and neutrality, where their assistance actions can in no way constitute or be perceived as a support for any of the sides involved.

Humanitarians must therefore, each day, by their words and their deeds, provide *de facto* evidence of their humanitarian nature by respecting these principles. If they fail to do so, they can be legitimately suspected of being complicit with the opposing forces or having agendas other than offering assistance to those in need.

It is on this basis and going forward, with varying degrees of success, that humanitarian organizations have been negotiating with armed forces as they seek to carry out their exclusively humanitarian work. This is what humanitarian agencies refer to as the “humanitarian space”, which must be earned and confirmed each day.

Motivation as a common basis?

Adapted to the conflict that has been raging now in Afghanistan³ for close to 10 years, this nature of the relationship between soldier and humanitarian worker is seriously threatened.

Not so much, as some claim, because the international forces have been carrying out assistance or support actions which they refer to as humanitarian aid—attempting to guarantee the vital needs of the civil populations is part of the duties of all occupation forces—but because, in the narrative and in the field, assistance actions are conceived as being an integral part of the war strategy.

¹ Bouchet-Saulnier F. “The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law” pp.353-357, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., Boston, 2002.

² Idem pp.140-143.

³ This article refers primarily to the Afghan conflict, but the arguments can be applied, regardless of the conflict or the armed players.

In fact, the military doctrines of stabilization⁴ and counter-insurrection implemented by Western forces, in addition to their military component, strive to develop and monitor a strong civilian element designed to secure the support of the Afghan people (“comprehensive approach”⁵).

When this civilian component is not led directly by the armed forces (by the PRTs or provincial reconstruction teams), the desire to coordinate the non-military players (NGOs, United Nations, private companies) is designed to unify efforts under a single banner—the fight to win the war against the opposing forces (in this case the Taliban and other insurgent forces) and allow the development of a new Afghanistan, to the benefit of its people, as well as the world’s security. The now-famous quote from Secretary of State Colin Powell shows this perfectly. He said: “...*I am serious about making sure we have the best relationship with the NGOs who are such a force multiplier for us, an important part of our combat team. We are all committed to the same, singular purpose to help every man and woman in need, who is hungry...*”⁶ From the statement “whoever is not with us is against us” that polarized the extreme vision of the world one can conclude that the agendas of each of the players have been simplified: any action in the field is either in support of or against the war effort.

MSF refuses to be coordinated by the armed forces on the ground or to allow itself to be assimilated into an instrument for wining the war. In times of dialogue with members of the armed forces of Western countries engaged in Afghanistan, this clear position on the part of MSF is doubly misunderstood: we have yet common origins in the West, which should place us in the same camp, based on the still widespread theory of the war of civilizations and we have yet the same motivations, namely the well-being of the Afghan people...

For MSF, its undeniably European historical origins are not in any way the standard under which its legitimacy and values were formed. Solidarity is a value that is common to all cultures and religions and is based on the conviction that there is no suffering that is unavoidable from the moment that there are ways and means of providing a satisfactory response.

Moreover, motivation cannot be sufficient for working toward a common cause; one can reasonably put forward a position that the Taliban and other opponents of what is perceived to be a foreign occupation have the same convictions for acting and fighting for the good of the Afghan people.

Objectives and means as a cardinal difference!

So, from now on are we to look for the basis of collaboration in a unit of objectives?

4 Department of Defence, (2006), “Directive 3000.05: Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations,” available on the Internet at: www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/300005p.pdf

⁵ NATO, “A Comprehensive Approach” available on the Internet at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_51633.htm

⁶ Speech to NGOs, Department of State, October 26, 2001.

Humanitarian assistance, as conceived by Médecins Sans Frontières is intended solely for the purpose of saving lives. Its goal is to provide assistance to today's victims and not to work to change the system that will hypothetically offer better living conditions tomorrow.

So democracy, the building of a state or the defence of a society model, as the ambitions of the Afghan government and its Western allies can be described, are not part of our humanitarian objectives, and this is especially so as it is one of the major issues in the conflict.

However, adapting actions to local needs and capabilities is part of the responsibilities of Médecins Sans Frontières, especially as it seeks to avoid delaying the potential for reconstructing an autonomous model for the supply of basic services to communities affected by the conflict.

Assistance to persons in need right now is, for Médecins Sans Frontières, an end in itself and not a means to achieve other, higher ends without imposing value judgments as to the appropriateness of the latter. This represents the organization's sole agenda and is the *sine qua non* condition for appearing as a player that is acceptable to all parties to the conflict. Today, more than ever, assistance is needed: 2009 was the year that saw the highest number of deaths since the start of the conflict,⁷ insecurity reigned in most regions and, according to a study by the ICRC, some 68% of the population have very limited or no access to health services.⁸ We believe that this assistance can only be delivered in areas of very low security if we are seen to be independent of the conflict and the fighting forces, non-politicized and perceived as clearly intent on solely providing assistance to the persons who are receiving the help. This concern for independence even involves the type of funding for the assistance. In the view of MSF, there is no question of accepting funds from the countries that are engaged in the conflict, as that risks having the organization seen as a tool for implementation of the policies of certain belligerents.

That being the case, it is impossible and dangerous for humanitarian players such as MSF to be able to respond favourably to complaints from NATO strategists who "complain that military and civilian aid groups currently 'don't plan together, don't train together' and hardly share information."⁹

This type of position, which responds to a statement by a senior U.S. official advocating the gathering of intelligence on the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan through humanitarian organizations,¹⁰ shows that at the very least there is a lack of knowledge as to what humanitarian organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières are all about.

⁷ UNAMA, "Afghanistan Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2009."

⁸ *Our World: Views from Afghanistan*. Opinion Survey, 2009. Survey by Ipsos for the ICRC.

⁹ Taped speech by Anders Rasmussen, NATO Secretary General, quoted in *The Guardian*, 4/3/2010.

¹⁰ Quotation from Richard Holbrooke, U.S. Special Representative, by Robert Burns, Associated Press. April 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wirestory?id=7280988&page=1>

The Need for Dialogue

So it seems that there is a need to develop a dialogue with the armed forces, politicians and strategists to clarify the positions and objectives of the humanitarian action, as practiced by MSF. Unless it allows for mutual respect, this dialogue, in the view of MSF, would be intended to have MSF recognized for what it is – an emergency medical organization working exclusively to help the sick and injured, an organization that respects the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. Nothing more, nothing less! And the MSF line will be exactly the same with all its interlocutors, whether they be members of the international coalition in Afghanistan, Afghan authorities or opposition forces.

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